

Keeping the Faith Mark 13: 1-8; Hebrews 10; 11-25

In preparing my thoughts for this morning, I felt like I was building on a continuation of Stan's message last week when he talked about Sainly Living. In our efforts to believe that we, ourselves, might be saints- it seems important to remember that title does not come easily. In fact, this message could, maybe should have, been entitled, "Keeping the Faith When Times are Tough." We have a confident faith in God's love for all who acknowledge God. We then attempt to live lives of gratitude for the great gift of salvation through Jesus Christ's sacrifice and the blessed presence of the Holy Spirit. However, each of us being so very human, easily slip back in relying on our own inner strength, only to find the TOUGH TIMES can threaten to be TOUGH most of the time.

An Iowa newspaper once contained this blooper: "There is a ninety percent chance of...tomorrow!" Several years ago a cartoon depicted a scruffy, robed and bearded sidewalk prophet carrying a sign that read, "Bad News! The world is NOT coming to an end, and you'll have to cope!! A bit on the strange side of an attempt at humor, but not inaccurate. No matter what others might tell us, we do need to move through our lives assuming there will be a tomorrow-rainy or not- and that it is possible the world is not coming to an end just yet.

The discussion between Jesus and his disciples in our Mark scripture is precipitated by the disciple's admiration of the great and glorious building called the Temple. They say, "...what large stones, what a large building!" It was not idle chatter...they were noticing something that was truly amazing. Herod the Great was an avid builder and he had taken it upon himself to rebuild the Temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians. He doubled the area size of the Temple making it the largest man-made platform in the ancient world. The structures that were erected on the perimeter, as well as the new Temple, covered approximately 145 acres. Anyone who visited the area as well as the local residents, could not help but be impressed. The enormity of the structures provided an ideal reference point for Jesus to speak about the events to come. Anything that could topple such a magnificent edifice must truly be significant. The disciples could not help but ask questions- thinking Jesus could not really be serious when he said the Temple would one day be completely destroyed.

As Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives, he looks out over at the Temple- but also as well, far out into history. The inner circle of disciples is with Jesus. He had been attempting to prepare them for his death, but now he is indicating the problems they will face. In reality, it is the early church being addressed- a church still reeling after the fall of Jerusalem. In this time, Jesus warns them to beware of religious fanatics, those who either pose as messiahs or strut around and speak as if they have a private line to God. Suddenly, we can feel that the Lord is addressing US in our own volatile time when often religious fanatics prove problematic even within the life of an organized church.

Over the ages, humanity has produced predictions of the end times leaving the impression that at the end of the world, it will all be over. Jesus words to his disciples in our Mark scripture suggests something else. In verse 8, Jesus defines the coming destruction and violence as “the beginning of the birth pangs.” Not just an end, not just something to be endured, but the birth of something new and great. We do well to live into that hope.

A number of years ago, a devout couple became obsessed with “the end of the world.” They packed up their belongings and moved to a beautiful hilltop in Virginia to be ready for the Lord’s appearing. They stayed the rest of their lives, social agencies eventually took care of them. Their lives ended in a hospital- expectations of the coming of the Lord came in a way they had not anticipated.

Meanwhile, the woman’s brother continued his work, providing for his family in every way, served on hospital and college boards as well as other community services. He, too, knew the Lord would someday come, but he believed in serving God and others as he waited for that great event.

Jesus words to the disciples when they expressed awe and admiration for the great and beautiful building made with human hands could and should be words that cut to the inner most part of OUR hearts. That which is of this world is very temporary. Thus, the wealth, prestige, and material things that we focus so much of our lives on, are not the primary determiner of our value nor our ultimate salvation. Whether it is personal wealth or a common wealth- such as that of this church- we need to be very clear that it is NOT the wealth itself that is long lasting, but it is HOW we USE that wealth- for the betterment of the world- that will live into eternity.

It seems that when there are issues that threaten a church, those issues most times are over building issues. It is important and even critical that this building be maintained. But it is also critical to collectively remember that the “building” will ultimately someday be destroyed. However, this community of God- each saint striving to worship, support and build up the whole while being drawn closer to one another and God- holds the potential of living and being effective for eternity. The earliest history of this church dates back to 1871, some 150 years ago!! Some of us can remember those who were leadership in the past many years. They maintained a building, but also built a community of believers that continues today. As work begins to pursue yet another option for pastoral leadership, it seems critical that the emphasis be placed on the “family” of this church and not on the beautiful building we call our church.

The passage from Hebrews for today uses the image of the Levite priests to explore the significance of Christ. The temple priests offered many sacrifices whereas Christ made a

sacrifice “once and for all” and then “sat down at the right hand of God.” The priests in the temple were kept busy helping the people to understand and fulfill the demands of God. Christ has finished his work and now is seated, serenely confident that all that needs to be done in our relationship with God, has been done. Because of Christ’s work, we are enabled to “approach God through him.” The go-between priests are no longer necessary. I find it interesting to note that the verses speak of “the priest standing day by day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.” However, it also states, “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since then has been waiting....For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

The emphasis on Christ making a one time sacrifice versus the priests, needing to day after day continue to make sacrifices was a radical change in Jewish thinking. WE understand that we have direct access to God- whether we use it or not, is another point. But to the people to whom the writer of Hebrews was directing these words, this concept was a complete overturning of their previous training. Consider the joy and apprehension of going directly before God when previous traditions expected only the High Priest could enter God’s presence.

Both lessons today reflect a background of change, uncertainty. Jesus said the Temple- the glorious, wonderfully built Temple would be destroyed, with no stone remaining on another. The radical change from necessary daily sacrifices of the high priests to the once and for all sacrifice of Christ- both speak to change of great magnitude. It was hard for the disciples to believe Jesus’ words regarding the temple. But the destruction on 9/11 of the World Trade Center twin towers was, and sometimes still is, hard for us to believe. Buildings are just that- material things. What is built with God and for others will last forever.

There is something in human nature that prompts us to want to map out the future with precision and certainty. To most such efforts, Jesus seems to redirect the focus away from curiosity about the future and time schedules. It is as though he says to us, “Instead of having a schedule priority, have a service priority.” Blessed is the person who is busy in service while waiting for Christ to return.

So...”Keeping the Faith” What does this mean in our lives.....lives, that in reality are just a brief moment when compared to all eternity? Does not, “Keeping the Faith” mean spreading the good news of Jesus Christ through our actions, our words and the values we keep? Actions, words and values as our primary focus, not material structures and financial efforts.

It seems appropriate to return to Hebrews 10- the last few verses of our Hebrew reading- Listen with open minds and hearts, absorbing these truths..

“Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith.....Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Let’s look back at those verses. We are being challenged by the Epistle writer of long ago:

*Let us move close to God because of the new and living way opened to us by Christ.

*Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.

*Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds (NOTE: not provoking one another to unkind and angry words)

*Let us not neglect to meet together.

*Let us encourage one another, especially as we anticipate the Day of Christ’s return.

Confidence, faithfulness, mutual disciplining, and Christian community of fellowship, worship and service are the earmarks of keeping the faith.

We have no way of knowing when the day of Christ’s return will be. Thus, if we live lives in anticipation of that coming, we will be motivated now to share the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed. When the expectation for Christ’s return is strong in the believer’s faith perspective, there is also strong attention to the concerns of this life.

Will we be like the couple who hole themselves up in a mountain cabin waiting for Christ’s return or will we strive to be like the woman’s brother who lived and worked for a better world? Will we strive to put a comfortable cushion of money in savings and keep a never changing building or will we use up our wealth so that others might benefit and strive to make the fullest, and most God glorifying use of both the stone and material blessings? Which is truly “Keeping the Faith?”

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